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ABSTRACT

This study used a combination of methods suggested by the literature to study the problem of stress and burnout in 30 employees of the Comptrollers Branch of the Canadian International Development Agency over a period of one year. A number of techniques were used, including administration of the Work Environmental Scale (WES) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), individual counseling sessions, group problem solving meetings, and a stress clinic. Results of the WES showed that on the average, the employees demonstrated high levels of work pressure, above average involvement, task orientation, and peer cohesion; average autonomy and innovation, and below average supervisor support, control, and physical comfort; and low clarity. The results of the MBI indicated that at least 13 employees were in phase 7 or higher of the 8 phases of burnout. Ten employees referred themselves for individual counseling, six have continued for ongoing counseling, and two have decided to make career changes. Results were used by staff, management and counselors to change the course of continuing events. A follow-up on actions taken by management and a second administration of the WES and MBI will be carried out over the next few months. (LLL)

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# STRESS AND BURNOUT

## An Organizational Intervention

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## ABSTRACT

An organizational intervention was undertaken with 30 staff in a federal agency to identify and deal with presumed high levels of stress and potential burnout. A number of techniques were used, including administration of the Work Environment Scale and the Maslach Burnout Inventory, individual counselling sessions, group problem solving meetings and a stress clinic. Levels of stress were considered high and burnout was evident in some staff. The techniques used helped to identify sources of stress, improve communication, increase support systems and serve as a beginning for reduction of stressors. Follow-up measures will be taken to determine long-term effectiveness.

# INTRODUCTION

The area of stress and burnout has received much attention over the past few years both at the research and practical level as well as popular literature. Not only has stress received much individual attention, but organizations have come to realize that the effects of extreme stress and potential burnout have significant financial costs including increased illness and accidents, higher turnover, reduced productivity and even at times legal damages. As organizations become more convinced that their employees for financial reasons as well as social reasons are valued assets, they are turning to ideas of reduction of stress or assistance with coping techniques. Stress is a response to demands made on an individual who must react to these demands. As stress is interactional, to understand it you must understand the relationship between the individual, the environment and the source of stress. Individuals with particular personality characteristics interact with environments which include various stressors. Sources of stress in the work setting include job complexity, work overload, rate of change, role complexity and ambiguity, lack of supervisor and peer support, lack of control or participation in decisions. Non-work sources of stress include family problems, financial difficulties, daily hassles, and life transitions. Burnout is more difficult to

define. It has been defined (Pines & Aronson, 1988) as a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in emotionally demanding situations. It is accompanied by symptoms such as physical depletion, disillusionment, irritability, lack of concentration, depression and cynicism. Since organizations under stress endure a cost in productivity, absenteeism, and even illness, it is important for management to recognize the effects of stress and prevent excessive stress and burnout where possible. This paper presents an attempt to intervene in an organization where management expressed a concern that excessive stress could have potential harmful effects on staff and operations. In January 1990, the Assistant Comptroller of the Canadian International Development Agency approached the Counselling Services Division to give advice and assistance with an apparent high degree of stress amongst financial officers and support staff, and a fear of potential burnout or similar problems with some of the staff. The Division consists of around 30 employees who work on the financial planning and management of large dollar volume international projects. Workload is high, constant, turnaround time fast, and potential for errors is high. There is also conflict in line/staff relationships which is inherent in many staff roles where there is also functional control. The purpose of this study was to utilize a combination of methods suggested by the literature to study the problem of stress in the Comptrollers Branch and determine measures to alleviate the

stress and prevent burnout.

## Review of Related Research

There is considerable evidence that work stress and burnout are associated with adverse health and well being (Maslach and Jackson, 1984: Golembiewski, 1987). The is also research (Burke and Bradshaw, 1981) that shows that work experiences often influence off-work experiences and vice versa.

Cherniss (1980) has proposed a model of burnout that refers to particular work setting characteristics which interact with individuals who enter the job with certain career orientations, work demands and supports. These factors interact with sources of stress and result in attitude changes in such areas as personal responsibility for outcomes, idealism, emotional detachment and alienation. This attitude change represents a way of coping with stress.

Mechanisms for reducing stress and burnout include (Howard et al, 1979) increasing individuals resources or reducing demands on the environment. The augmentation of resources include personal coping strategies such as better planning and time management, pursuing more realistic demands, knowing your strengths and

weaknesses, physical fitness, changing behaviour e.g. reduction of type A behaviour and changing jobs. Organizations can reduce or prevent stress or burnout by changing structures to include more participation (Jackson, 1984), changing the selection and training process (Cherniss, 1980), changing the reward system to appear more consistent or equitable, better defining of roles and workloads and redesigning jobs. Golembiewski, Hiles and Daly (1987) have shown that employees reaction to stress in the work place is also related to the nature of the social support system in the work group, both by supervisors and colleagues.

## METHOD

Subjects: The participants included 30 employees of the Comptrollers Branch, Canadian International Development Agency. This group included managers, financial management advisors, financial planners and support staff.

Instruments: Work Environment Scale (WES) - This is one of the many social climate scales developed by Rudolf Moos (Insel & Moos, 1981). It consists of ten subscales: involvement, peer cohesion, supervisor support, autonomy, task orientation, work pressure, clarity, control, innovation, and physical comfort. It contains 90 true and false statements. The instrument has acceptable psychometric qualities. It has been standardized on over 1400 individuals in a variety of general work groups and

over 1600 health care workers with good test - retest reliability (Insel & Moos, 1981). With respect to validity, the instrument accurately predicts that managers will see the environment more positively than employees. The scale does not measure personality nor physical environment but does measure attitudes and can help to identify work stressors.

**The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)** - The MBI is a standardized instrument that measures three aspects of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. This is a widely used measure with high internal consistency and test - retest reliability (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Validity has been demonstrated by correlations with independent behavioral ratings and by correlations with presence of job characteristics in the environment with potential for burnout.

## Procedure:

In order to allow for both a study of the problem and some measures to alleviate the stress, it was decided to use a combination of clinical and quantitative techniques. The employees would be interviewed to determine their views and at the same time offered counselling services. The work environment and stress levels would be measured, and programs would be conducted to help reduce stress that would relate specifically to

the work environment and that would utilize the support of the work group.

The following steps were taken in chronological order:

1) Meetings in Jan./Feb. 1990 with management to obtain a description of the work environment and their perception of the problems,

2) Interviews with employees (March/April 1990) - a sample of employees was suggested by management, although all employees were given the option of an interview. All interviews were kept confidential. All 20 employees interviewed were asked to be as open as possible about their workload, pressures, irritants, job satisfaction and recommendations for change,

3) Counselling Services - All employees were offered private counselling sessions to discuss stress, work problems or any other issues including personal problems,

4) Feedback meeting - A feedback meeting was held with all staff in June 1990 to view the aggregate results of interviews. At this meeting the WES and MBI scales were offered to any employee who agreed to complete it,

5) Meeting with staff and managers to feed back WES results and discuss problems and recommendations for solutions,

6) A one day stress clinic in Dec. 1991 was offered for all interested employees,

7) Follow-up - Management was committed to follow-up on issues

and irritants raised during the process.

8) Evaluation - Counselling Services was to interview employees and administer a further MBI and WES scale and provide feedback.

## RESULTS

There are two distinct groups within the Division. Financial Management Advisors (FMA's) who are situated in program branches and provide continuous professional advice to line managers, and financial planners who prepare corporate estimates and budgets and communicate with central government agencies. The results of the interviews demonstrated some concerns common to both groups. Major irritants included lack of control over work because of inadequate planning by clientele, fiscal year end overload, unreasonable management demands, confusion and inconsistency in decisions given to them, inadequate support, administrative hassles (e.g. telephone and computer systems), uneven work load distribution. Concerns specific to FMA's included role ambiguity vis-à-vis program managers, unreasonable service demands, high risk of giving poor advice, inadequate numbers of support staff. Financial Planners were concerned by arbitrary and unreasonable deadlines, lack of work planning, frequent policy changes and lack of support. On the positive side most employees were pleased with the work itself, the collegiality, the challenge, the power or authority within their role of being advice givers.

The results of the WES show that on the average, they demonstrate high levels of work pressure, above average involvement, task orientation, peer cohesion, average autonomy and innovation, and

below average supervisor support, control and physical comfort and low clarity. Financial Planners score lower on involvement, autonomy, and control and task orientation, than FMA's. Other scales were similar. The results of the MBI indicate that at least 13 employees were in phase 7 or higher of the 8 phases of burnout.

There were several indicators that the employees have used the material effectively. Ten employees referred themselves for individual counselling. Six have continued for ongoing counselling; two have decided to make career changes. Peer support was used effectively upon the death of a colleague from another division.

## DISCUSSION

It should be evident that this was a dynamic and interactive process that occurred over a period of a full year. Results and effects were used by staff, management and counsellors to change the course of continuing events. The results of the interviews were fed back to management, and organizational decisions were made to improve communication and recognition. The individual counselling sessions, by employees own declaration, helped employees to identify or clarify professional and personal stressors and to reduce stress.

In the middle of the process, the Assistant Comptroller was

appointed to another position outside the Branch. The branch planned that his position would not to be filled in the near future so that the two Directors (FMA group and Financial Planning group) would temporarily report directly to the Comptroller. This development provided a window of opportunity to deal with role conflict, boundaries of authority, and work processes.

By the time the feedback meeting occurred in November, a new Assistant Comptroller had been appointed. He attended the meeting and made a positive attempt to correct problems that were creating stress.

The one day stress clinic was held in December and was well received by all staff. Individual interviews were held with a number of employees after the feedback meetings and stress clinics were held. All employees felt that considerable progress had been made in the identification of stress producers and in the clarification of uncertainty and ambiguity. In addition, the feedback instruments and discussions were helpful in bringing out the positive aspects of the work environment. From a clinical perspective, each client who came for counselling during this period has indicated to counsellors that their personal stress level has been reduced and they felt less likely to burn out.

The final comments from management indicated a commitment to the

challenge of working with employees so that they can resolve those matters which were identified as being contributors to the stressful situation. Management became more conscious of the presence of stress, its consequences and means by which it can be relieved in the future. Management suggested that a further quantitative measure be taken in a year to see to what degree things have improved.

## CONCLUSIONS

The nature of this study and the timing can only lead to qualitative conclusions as to the effectiveness of the program. A combination of quantitative measurements, counselling and educational components as well as clinical observations was used, and general satisfaction was described by both management and employees. In fact, another division of the Branch has asked the Counselling Division to prepare a similar intervention for their employees.

Further information would be required to do a proper evaluation. A follow-up on actions taken by management and a second administration of the WES and MBI will be carried out over the next few months.

The process created a group effort, with management involvement, to attempt to enhance problem solving and provide social support for stressful situations and potential burnout. The intervention

was well received despite the fact that it required committment to change and some risk management in a naturally conservative environment.

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